

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

On Acceptance and Employment

Experiencing the Advances and the Setbacks

by Unknown Author

Article appeared in Polare magazine: June 2003 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



I show such joy in dancing.

I was touched by the relevance and the intensity of Elizabeth Riley's Report on The Transgender Dead, in *Polare* #51. There have been advances and setbacks, and I have experienced both in my life. I want to talk about two here, the enduring attitude of people to transgender people, and the employment situation.

On Being Accepted.

My male-to-female transition occurred about fifteen years ago, and it has been a tumultuous time, full of hope and despair. I have survived it, and have found a

satisfying equilibrium in life. Because of an abiding ease with who I am, I am not often "read" by people, and so my life has settled into a more or less normal pattern. I am quite plain looking, and not young, and in the times when I have been "read", the results have always been unfortunate.

The reaction of others has fallen into two categories. There are the people who loathe and detest us, and who are quite open about it; they are the ones who have given us the most trouble, and would have been responsible for the catastrophes faced by the unfortunates described in Elizabeth's Report. And there are those who appear to accept us as the human beings we are. The operational word here, is "appear". In fifteen years of living as a woman I have only met one person who has accepted me as human, without reservations - and he is my therapist! Others have appeared to be accepting, but in the end have only been tolerant. There is a big difference.

A person who accepts you accepts you warts and all, and will try to respect you for who you are. One who tolerates you will grant you living space on this earth as long as you conform to their own values. I don't think that I have met anyone (except as mentioned) who is willing to do that. Sooner or later they will judge you and find you wanting (unless you are young and pretty).

An example:

I'll give you an example of this, one of many. Recently I took an old friend to a dance, a dance where I have had a lot of fun, and no problems at all, probably because I show such joy in dancing. I have known this friend for many years, and have found her remarkably at ease with my gender dichotomy, and in general a very confident, self-assured person. In this case, however, she was acutely uncomfortable, although she is a good dancer. I couldn't figure out why, until she revealed that she was feeling upset because of me. Astonished, I asked why. She wouldn't say, but she slunk in her chair looking miserable, so of course no one asked her to dance. I stood up and looked interested, so of course I was asked to dance. When that piece was finished I asked the man to ask my friend for the next one, "because she is shy". This he did, and afterwards she told me that she felt awful because his partner was shooting poisonous looks at her. I muttered that I never perceived any such thing. She replied that that was because of my "unique situation". Amazed, I said, "You mean that they resent you because you are a genuine woman, and I am not?" Miserably, she muttered, "yes". I was completely at a loss to say anything, because my experience has been exactly the opposite - not to mention the fact that this man had been dancing with a variety of women that evening.

So, even this apparently accepting, self-assured person had been deluding herself (and me), and had secretly been holding herself as being superior because she was a "real woman". I have had many such experiences, most of them less subtle. If I have found a friend who appears to accept me, and then she finds out the "awful truth", her attitude changes subtly but definitely, and a distance appears between us. In several cases, it has been the end of the friendship.

If ever anyone accuses you of sexual treachery, never deny being a transsexual, but be prepared to justify it reasonably, "I was born this way, but by the way, I'm human too."

My best friends have never read me. Once a person does not read you, you can even ease their awareness of your obviously different appearance. "Oh, I can't wear my hair short, because I have such a broad face." Or, "I don't wear nail varnish because I have such big hands." Or, "It's hard for me to find nice-looking shoes because of my ample feet". You then graduate from being an odd looking

woman, to being an ordinary one with a broad face, big hands and large feet. Of course this must be done with a keen sensitivity to appropriate timing.

Beyond that, I have come to accept the fact that ordinary human beings simply cannot handle full acceptance of a transsexual as a fully human being. I'd like to hear of any contrary evidence from readers of this publication.

On Finding Employment.

And then there is the matter of employment, paid or otherwise. I agree absolutely with Elizabeth that employment is a "critical factor", necessary to escape from despair, and to maintain/acquire self-confidence, self-esteem and a feeling that we are fully human. Not to mention that employment is usually a prerequisite for a reasonable standard of living. Depending on anti-discrimination legislation won't help you at all. If you do, they'll only find some other excuse for not employing you; lots of excuses are possible. You need to do it another way.

Elizabeth said, "There is no rationale that can justify the relegating of the transgender community to a life that is sub-standard", economically and for social justice. But rational or not, that is what happens, particularly if you are not young and attractive. I have a suggestion for those of us who do not fall in that fortunate group: self-employment. If you can afford to set up a shop, well and good, but most of us cannot. Well, then, take out a business license, get an Australian Business Number and register with the relevant administrative body to cover what you want to do. There is a wide range of possible services that can be offered, and you can offer yours on your own terms.

For that you will probably also need specific training. Well, get trained. You can achieve this at technical colleges, secretarial colleges or even at universities. Yes, this can require some money, but it is worth it, even if you have to sacrifice everything else. You will find it, or borrow it. But don't steal it, or you will ruin everything.

If you are particularly fortunate you may be able to use your pre-transition skills, but this is often difficult.

When you have acquired the necessary skills, the next thing to get is experience. The best way to do this is to be a volunteer in your field of choice. Yes, you need to live while doing the volunteer work, but if you are drawing unemployment stipends you can explain truthfully that you cannot find a job until you have experience. If the authorities insist that you look for paid employment anyhow you can do that too.

You need only place modest advertisements in local papers or journals, and wait for the telephone to ring, A mobile phone is essential. Keep all receipts, to show the sceptical authorities, if necessary. If the authorities insist that you apply for jobs anyhow, do so as required, have interviews as relevant, but continue to get your practical experience. If you should actually be offered a job, by all means take it, but I must warn that it is not likely.

It is much better to get your experience before launching out on your own. "Oh, but who is going to hire a transsexual?" I don't know, but someone will, probably because they have not read you; be meticulous in learning the appearance and mannerisms of your gender. Yes, you may receive plenty of knock-backs. So what; keep trying, and trying and trying! If you persist you will succeed, one day. I guarantee it.

When you have taken out a Business License, making your home the base for your work, you can make all kinds of useful deductions for tax-exemption, including a relevant portion of your rent, your insurance, your transportation, etc. See a tax accountant to find out how to do this. Always declare all of your income, even if you are paid cash. This is really important.

My example:

I will tell you of my own experience. I can honestly say that if I can do it, anyone can! Because ... I chose to take care of children. A transsexual taking care of children? Unbelievable! Yes, but true.

This was my passion in life (although it was completely different from what I did before transition), so I decided to try to give it a go. The worst that could happen would be that I would fail, but I might even succeed; that thought was enough to give me courage. And I needed it.

After getting some experience in child care centres (and after having been rejected by quite a lot of them!), I undertook training in a technical college. That was an experience.

I gained entry to the course despite it's being hard to enrol in, probably because the college was bending over backwards to be open-minded. The young girl students in the classes read me, of course, and cordially despised me, showing no reluctance in showing it. But I made some friends with the older women in the course. The teachers were very cordial and helpful, and I really appreciated that; sometimes they even chastised other students for being nasty to me. I was probably the only transsexual who had ever tried to be a child care worker, and they were impressed by my courage. I was assigned to a child care centre for Placement Experience, and that went well because of my deep love for the children.

In due course I graduated, and started placing advertisements for work. The first thing I learned was that a person who was not young and pretty had precious little chance of being employed by a child care centre, because of the intense competition - even if they do not read you. So, I went into business for myself. I got an official Business Name, and the rest, as mentioned above, plus a Police Check and First Aid Training. The Police Check gave me some worry, but it was okay. The authorities were evidently sympathetic, because although they specified my previous family name, they did not state my previous given name which would have given the whole show away.

After lots of interviews (and rejections) I finally found clients, and have been happily caring for children ever since. It has been a source of great joy for me, and although child care is not at all respected financially in this society, the income has been enough to keep me alive. Even house-keepers get paid more, but child care is more fun!

Now, what is interesting is that in the child care centres where I did some years of volunteer work (even while being employed privately), once I was working there, not once did any parent of the children ever object to my working with their children, even though it is not at all hard to read me if you look hard. Evidently my love and skill with the children were enough to show that it was alright. Isn't that something? I even obtained paid employment in some of the centres.

Now, all of my work is with private clients, and it goes well. If a transsexual can find work caring for children, she can find work anywhere!

Be encouraged.

From the Polare Editor

I feel, after the views expressed in the past about my expressing views, that I should hasten to point out that I am writing here as my private-self, without drawing on the ineffable power and glory of my editorial hat.

I am impelled to respond because I am in profound disagreement with the burden of this talking point, and therefore wish to talk about it. I think the writer (let us call her X) assumes that her subjective views and individual experiences form a paradigm for the whole transgender community ... and I disagree. My own experiences are equally individual and subjective, but they differ so radically from hers that it is worth pointing out that there is no one-size-fits all pattern to life.

In fifteen years of living as herself, X has only found one person who accepts her as a human, without reservations. I, on the other hand, have retained many of my friends from before transition (some going back to primary school days, several to secondary school, many from university and a myriad from the other highways and byways of my life's journey). Have some of them judged me and found me wanting? Doubtless, but this is part and parcel of real life, and it doesn't stop them from remaining my friends despite what they see as faults, any more than my perception of their quirks would necessarily impel me to cross them off my life's dance card.

Talking of dances, X talks about her chagrin at finding out at a dance that a friend she thought she knew was really shallow and antipathetic. Well, hey, I've been disappointed in some people I thought were my friends and who revealed that they were uncomfortable with me, but some of them came around when they found out how much of the John they had been fond of was still present in Katherine and some I discarded as being too flawed to bother with. But the vast majority of my friends are still my friends, and I make new friends easily, and almost daily. I do not restrict myself to transgender society but go where I will and enjoy social occasions (such as trivia nights) and heartier pursuits such as sailing and crocodile wrestling (I made that last one up).

And no, I'm not young and pretty. I was fifty-two when I transitioned and I'm sixty-eight now. When I first transitioned I think I looked okay for a fifty-two-year-old, but I'm sure my social and employment successes did not depend on my drop-dead gorgeous appearance then and certainly do not now.

On the employment front, I did not have the option of starting a new life when I transitioned, nor would I have wanted to. I had a mortgage and a family to support, even if I had to do it from a distance, and therefore needed to maintain my income level by transitioning openly at my place of employment.

It might have been difficult for my employers to fire me from that position, although the N.S.W. Anti-Discrimination Act did not cover transgender at that time, but I have changed jobs several times since then (most recently two years ago) and even leaving aside the special case of employment by the Gender Centre, which might have found it hard to discriminate on gender grounds, I have been given responsible senior positions in a number of institutions and agencies. It is only fair to say that I have also failed to gain some of the positions I have sought, but I do not attribute that to my transgender status ... I suspect the stumbling block is more likely to have been my age or the presence of a better candidate.

X says "My best friends have never read me". As I have pointed out, many of my best friends have known me both as John and as Katherine but I have other friends who may or may not know, or guess, my past and I really don't care. Having written my autobiography and been interviewed many times on television and radio; and having stood for Federal Parliament as an openly transgender candidate for the Democrats (if its good enough for Georgina Beyer ...), I think it would be captious of me to complain if anyone made mention of my former life and my predecessor person.

I agree with X about gaining new and different qualifications, but I think everyone, not just transgender people, should be constantly upgrading their minds until their cerebral cortices are stuffed to capacity. In one of my periods between contract jobs I took a T.A.F.E. course in desktop publishing and just look where that has taken me! To the editorship of the leading transgender magazine in the Southern Hemisphere. Or at least in Petersham.

X says "who is going to hire a transsexual?". Well, X, people do, and it's not only because they don't read the transsexual (or transgender) in question. I have never bothered to hide my past, even if I have had my degrees, diplomas and professional memberships transcribed in my preferred name. The people who are

going to hire a transsexual are those who think the transsexual can do a job better than the other candidates. It is, therefore, up to the transgender people (or transsexuals) to make sure their C.V.s and references are well presented, that they are prepared for interview, that they are confident and friendly, mature and articulate, and above all, that they believe in their ability to do the job and their right to be judged on equal terms with other candidates. I do not lose sight of the fact that some jobs may be harder for a transgender to gain than others. X's ambition to look after small children must have been one of the hardest choices possible. More praise to her in achieving her ambition!

I should add that I have many mature-age transgender friends who have achieved success in their careers after transition, some in stealth mode and some openly. It is often the late-blooming transgender with the advantage of life experience (and qualifications and training) who has the strength to overcome the obstacle of unemployment as he or she has overcome so many other obstacles.

So there you have it. X's view that life is hard for the transgender in terms of acceptance and finding employment and my view that social acceptance is becoming easier to achieve and that the barriers to employment are not as rigid as they might once have been.

Both views are based on personal experience and are equally valid. There are probably many other variations in the mix, but any advice you get can only be a guide, a hint, a friendly hand on a darkened path. Your life is yours to live and much of it you will fashion through your own personality, experience and, let's face it, good fortune. Some of us are blessed with accommodating employers, loving families and lateral-thinking friends. Others are not so fortunate.

Bonne chance!

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.